Voter Registration in BC

Discussion Paper

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ELECTIONS BC
Province of British Columbia

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Voter Registration in BC

The Issues

There are two urgent, and connected, issues facing Elections BC regarding provincial voter registration. They are voters list maintenance and declining voter participation in electoral democracy.

On May 3, 2004, the Chief Electoral Officer is required to conduct a province-wide enumeration pursuant to section 42 of the *Election Act*. The Act specifies that a general enumeration must be commenced on the first Monday in May during the 3^{d} calendar year after the last general election, in all electoral districts for the purpose of registering voters and updating voter registration information. The Act does not specify the manner in which the enumeration is to be conducted, and permits the Chief Electoral Officer to cancel the enumeration, following consultation with the Election Advisory Committee, if the voters list is sufficiently current that a general enumeration is not justified. A province-wide enumeration in 2004 is projected to cost between $5.1 and $15.4 million, depending on the method used.

Elections BC's 2003/04-2005/06 Service Plan, submitted on November 15, 2002 to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services, identified as one of its goals to "ensure a current, complete and accurate voters list". To achieve this goal, the organization identified five key objectives:

- Use external data sources to update the voters list
- Provide low cost, continuous public access to voter registration or updating
- Ensure voter data meets legislated requirements
- Ensure the voters list accurately identifies voters' electoral districts and voting areas
- Seek opportunities to cancel the 2004 province-wide enumeration, and avoid the associated expenditures

The voters list must be current, complete and accurate to ensure that voters can exercise their right to vote and to participate in recall and initiative campaigns. A current, complete and accurate voters list also ensures that voters are assigned to the appropriate electoral district and voting area, and that only eligible voters are permitted to participate in electoral events. List maintenance must be effective and economical, and access to voter information must be restricted to ensure individual privacy is protected.

Currency is a measure of how up-to-date the list is; completeness is a measure of how many eligible individuals are on the list; accuracy is a measure of the correctness of voter data. Each element of quality must be present for effective electoral administration.

Results of the 2001 census published by Statistics Canada indicate that over 46% of the population of B.C. changed their residential address between 1996 and 2001, creating considerable challenges in ensuring on-going currency and accuracy of the voters list. Elections BC's budget has been significantly reduced, and it is imperative that Elections BC create a

continuous voter registration model that can be maintained with reduced costs and greater efficiencies.

The Chief Electoral Officer has been studying all aspects of voter registration in B.C., including alternatives to enumeration. What has emerged is the fact that the present voters list only contains approximately 70% of eligible voters, currency of the list appears to be well below the traditionally accepted benchmark of 85%, and accuracy may also be below acceptable standards. Clearly, the voters list is not sufficiently current to justify cancellation of the 2004 enumeration, unless a dramatic improvement in the list is made prior to May 2004. As cancellation appears unlikely, a cost effective alternative method, with a sustainable maintenance program to follow enumeration, is essential.

One reason for the poor level of completeness of the voters list is the trend of declining participation in electoral democracy. Voter turnout at traditional ballot box elections is declining throughout North America. While this trend is historic, a recent federal study suggests it may be at an all time low. Turnout of voters who are registered at B.C. provincial general elections has been consistent for the last two elections, however the percentage of eligible voters on the voters list continues to decline. At the 2001 general election, only 77.64% of eligible voters were registered. Turnout at that election was 70.95% of registered voters, representing only 55.09% of eligible British Columbians. It is critical that this issue be addressed to safeguard our democratic system and ensure the viability of political institutions.

Low participation rates are especially an issue among young people, who are dramatically under-represented on the voters list. The participation rates of 18 – 24 year olds in elections lag significantly behind other age groups. However, recent studies have shown that individuals in this age group who are registered voters actually vote at a higher rate than other groups. Therefore, voter registration appears to be a essential step in ensuring acceptable participation rates by this age group.

Elections BC must develop a new strategy for voter registration in B.C. to avoid costly enumerations, streamline voters list maintenance and encourage the participation of all eligible voters in the electoral process. In doing so, it may also be timely to explore government-wide solutions to client data management. Following is an overview of the steps Elections BC has taken, and the options and opportunities that the organization is exploring in moving to a sustainable, efficient and economical voter registration and voters list maintenance process.

Background

Voter Registration and Enumeration

Since 1982, Elections BC has conducted three door-to-door enumerations, and one enumeration by mail. Door-to-door enumerations became increasingly problematic for a variety of reasons, including changing lifestyles, large numbers of voters away from their homes for work-related reasons, and individual concerns for privacy and safety. In many areas it was difficult to recruit sufficient or reliable enumerators willing to learn complex procedures for two weeks' work.

Rural and remote areas pose unique challenges for efficient and effective door-to-door enumeration, which is prohibitively expensive on a per-voter basis.

It was also apparent that the high cost of door-to-door enumeration was not resulting in a substantially revised voters list. Door-to-door enumerations resulted in confirmation of approximately 60% of the previous voters list, at great expense. (A door-to-door enumeration in 2004 is projected to cost $15.4 million.) For these reasons, it was determined that a postal enumeration method would be more appropriate for the 1999 enumeration, at a cost of approximately $4 million. Although it was far less costly than a door-to-door enumeration, the 1999 enumeration did not result in a greater percentage of eligible voters being registered and demonstrated the need for a more effective means of voter registration and list maintenance.

Voter registration is very accessible in British Columbia. Eligible individuals may register in person or by mail on any business day between elections, and updates to existing registrations are accepted in person or by mail, fax, telephone or email. During an election, special registration sites are established for the first week of the election period. In addition, voter registration or updates are available in conjunction with all voting opportunities. During the 2001 general election, approximately 26% of new registrations and updates were obtained during the first week of the campaign, with the remaining 74% obtained in conjunction with voting. Registration and updating in conjunction with voting is very convenient to voters. However, it is the preference of Elections BC that all voters are registered at their current address prior to the beginning of an election period to ensure efficiencies in event administration and provide accurate spending limits for political parties and candidates.

British Columbia has had a continuous voters list for at least 70 years, and was the first provincial jurisdiction in Canada to computerize the voters list. Voters list maintenance is supported by computer files from the Vital Statistics Agency of the Ministry of Health, and the Motor Voter program in which Elections BC receives address updates for voters through drivers license information provided by the Insurance Corporation of BC (ICBC). Elections BC is also a participant agency in the Multiple Address Change Web site hosted by government (http://www.addresschange.gov.bc.ca).

The existence of a continuous list, coupled with the generous availability of registration opportunities, raises the question of the utility and effectiveness of a calendared enumeration. Calendared enumerations in the federal electoral system were eliminated in 1997, and replaced by targeted revisions by Elections Canada to focus on under-registered groups and areas of high-mobility or growth.

The B.C. *Election Act* requires that enumerations be conducted in the month of May. May was originally selected with door-to-door enumerations in mind, to take advantage of the weather and longer daylight hours while avoiding the summer vacation period. However, mobility studies have demonstrated that the majority of household moves occur in June, July and September. It would be more effective, therefore, to focus on voter registration during the winter preceding a general election to ensure maximum currency of the data.

Currency, Completeness and Accuracy Audit

Elections BC and Elections Canada have designed a joint study of the provincial and federal voters lists to assess their currency, completeness and accuracy. The survey portion of the audit will be conducted during May 2003 and data analysis is scheduled for June 3 – 20. The audit report is expected to be completed by the end of July 2003. At that time, the findings will provide objective measures as to the state of both lists. The audit data will be used to identify specific areas of each agency's data that require quality improvement, and to provide a baseline for assessing the effectiveness of voters list maintenance and enhancement strategies.

Request for Legislative Amendments

The Chief Electoral Officer has recommended to the Legislative Assembly that legislation be amended to restrict use of the provincial voters list for electoral purposes only, consistent with the *Canada Elections Act*. This will allow Elections BC access to federal voter data. Data from the National Register of Electors is currently unavailable to Elections BC due to existing provisions in the *Election Act* and other statutes permitting access to the voters list for juror selection, family maintenance enforcement and adoption searches. In order for British Columbia to obtain access to federal voter information for the purpose of maintaining the provincial voters list, Canada's Chief Electoral Officer must be assured that federal voter information will not used for any non-electoral purpose.

The benefits of accessing the National Register of Electors include receiving updated address information from Canada Customs and Revenue Agency (CCRA) through tax-filing information as well as identifying prospective new voters from citizenship authorities. Through Elections Canada, Elections BC would have access to a large amount of new voter information from the annual CCRA update in August of each year.

The Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services, in their December 2002 report to the Legislative Assembly, recommended "that the Ministry of Attorney General proceed with its plan to amend the *Election Act* in the next session, removing the requirement that the provincial voters list be used for jury selection purposes. This amendment would enable Elections BC to gain access to federal voter data for significant cost savings". Elections BC staff have been working with the staff of the Court Services Branch of the Ministry of Attorney General to identify a suitable alternative data source for juror selection, and have been in consultation with potential data providers and the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner. It appears unlikely that legislative change will be possible before the Fall 2003 sitting of the Legislative Assembly.

Opportunities

There are a number of opportunities available to Elections BC at this time which must be considered in developing a strategy for the future. They include: building partnerships with federal and local government electoral administrators to avoid the duplication of registration services and to incorporate best practices from other jurisdictions; using technology to expand access to voter registration; and expanding voter education and information programs to encourage participation.

Federal and Local Government Partnerships

Electoral administration in B.C. is administered by three levels of government, resulting in a triplication of effort and cost in some areas. The development of a common voters list for federal, provincial and local government elections could result in significant savings for each level of government through cost-sharing agreements. Similarly, the availability of a common geographic and address data base could result in savings and efficiencies. Through a common list and common geographic base, levels of government could partner in voter registration campaigns, voter education strategies and other electoral administration activities resulting in enhanced client services at a reduced cost to each electoral administration body.

The *Local Government Act* establishes that municipalities may create their own voters list, register all voters at the time and place of voting (eliminating the need for a voters list) or may use the provincial voters list. Elections BC charges a small fee to recover the cost of production of voters list extracts for municipalities that choose to use the provincial list, averaging $160 per municipality. The Union of B.C. Municipalities estimates that it would cost a medium-size municipality approximately $300,000 to produce their own voters list. In the 2002 local government elections, 70 municipalities used the provincial voters' list as their base. A conservative estimate is that this data sharing saved taxpayers over $10.5 million dollars in the administration of the 2002 municipal triennial elections.

Elections Canada and local government representatives have expressed interest in entering into a partnership with Elections BC with the goal of creating a "universal voters list" and common voter registration model for all three levels of government. Those B.C. municipalities that currently do not use the voters list provided by Elections BC will be encouraged to do so to provide seamless voter registration services and to achieve more complete registration coverage for the province.

Canada and British Columbia's Chief Electoral Officers have agreed to strengthen and expand an existing partnership agreement by exploring ways to avoid duplication of efforts, streamline electoral administration, and improve accessibility and services to voters. The initial focus of this expanded agreement will be on shared electoral geography and integrated voter/elector data management.

Technology – Registration and Confirmation On-line

During the 2001 general election, the Elections BC toll-free information line received over 74,000 calls in a four-week period. At the present time, Elections BC handles approximately 2,000 letters, faxes and phone calls monthly in non-event periods. The recent recall campaigns have had a direct impact on the organization's thinly-spread resources and upward trends show little sign of reversing. Funding and associated staffing levels do not permit extended hours of operation for the toll-free service between electoral events, creating a gap in service.

On-line voter registration updates are currently available through the Elections BC Web site, and a voter registration application may be requested on-line to be mailed to the applicant. However, the system does not currently provide confirmation of registration, nor can an individual down-load an application form. On-line voter registration and confirmation capabilities through Elections BC's Web site would offer significant improvements in service without further straining critical resources.

A recent study conducted by Elections Canada identified a number of security and privacy issues in relation to on-line registration and confirmation, but concluded that, following resolution of these issues, technology is sufficiently advanced to implement on-line confirmation and down-loadable registration forms within one year and full on-line registration in the year following. Elections BC wishes to develop these options at the same time to provide consistent service to voters. However, due to the requirement for a voter's signature in order to register as a provincial voter in B.C., Elections BC faces greater challenges. Research is underway to identify opportunities to overcome this issue.

Elections BC could offer secure on-line voter confirmation by expanding the current updating service and linking it to a secure copy of the voters list data. Sufficient security must be provided to ensure that individuals can not use this service to obtain residential address information of others. For new registrations, it may be feasible to permit either the completion of an on-line registration form which is then printed by the applicant, signed and mailed to Elections BC, or to implement a fully on-line system by asking for the applicant's drivers license number in addition to regularly required registration data. Elections BC could then obtain an electronic image of the applicant's signature from the Insurance Corporation of BC (ICBC) to complete the registration. Discussions are currently underway with ICBC in this regard.

Voter Education

The most common reasons youth cite for not voting is a lack of knowledge of politics and candidates, a lack of interest in politics in general and a general dislike of politics. International IDEA (the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance), in a study of youth voter participation, found that educational programs on democracy encourage youth participation. As well, the IDEA study found that teaching children about politics and voting at a young age, including "mock" elections, helps children learn about voting for issues that are important to them.

Prior to the 2001 general election, Elections BC developed a Grade 5 Election Toolkit. The Toolkit is a guide to the election process in British Columbia and is designed to introduce children to the basic principles of a provincial election. As well, it is expected that participants will learn the terminology associated with provincial elections, and the concept of voting. The main message contained through use of the Toolkit is that voting is important. The kit was sent to every Grade 5 classroom in the province, and received very positive reviews from teachers. A Grade 11 kit is currently in development, and will be distributed to all Grade 11 classrooms within the next year.

Voter education is a significant aspect of election administration, and is a mechanism to increase voter participation. During an election, Elections BC conducts an extensive public awareness advertising campaign and mails "Where to Vote" information cards to all registered voters. Through educating and informing the public about the electoral process, the importance of voter registration and the opportunities available for citizens to participate in electoral democracy, Elections BC attempts to promote participation.

Future Directions

In light of the current issues and opportunities Elections BC is facing, there are five key areas of focus which offer the greatest potential for a sustainable, economical and effective voter registration and voters list maintenance program. They are: "universal" voter registration; cross-maintenance of the voters list; intelligent use of external data sources; investment in alternative service delivery; and voter education. However, there are other alternatives that it may be timely to explore for benefit to a greater audience than Elections BC. These include the concept of government-wide client and geographic data bases.

Universal Voter Registration

A universal, continuous voter registration model would permit individuals to register to vote in federal, provincial and local government elections in B.C. by registering with either Elections BC, Elections Canada or any B.C. municipal government. Common voter registration for all three levels of government would reduce costs, enhance client service and eliminate the need for periodic enumerations, as there would be continuous "multi-channel" opportunities for voter registration. There are slight voter qualification distinctions between the three levels of government, necessitating further research and refinement prior to development of an implementation strategy and timetable.

Cross-Maintenance of the Voters List

A common approach to voter registration and the sharing of voter data provides the greatest opportunity for continuous completeness, currency and accuracy of the voters list. Assuming legislative amendments to permit Elections BC to access federal voter data, updates from the

National Register of Electors would be used to refresh the voters lists, and updates from the provincial and local government records would be passed to Elections Canada.

The simplest model would see each level of government responsible for maintaining the quality of their data to agreed-upon standards. A more complex model would involve one level of government becoming the lead agency and assuming responsibility for maintaining a universal voters list for all three levels of government. However, this model would be much more difficult to manage as the election dates for each jurisdiction are not harmonized and there are considerable legislated differences in the updating opportunities available to registered voters.

The Ontario government is currently working toward a co-operative, tri-partite single list model. The *Single List Project* will potentially see one partner, Elections Ontario, serve as the "registrar" of voter information, with Elections Canada and the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (responsible for the voters list used in municipal elections), accessing the data as users. The Ontario government will update the register based on its own data and from information updates supplied by federal, municipal and other sources.

Elections BC prefers a simplified model that is based on data sharing and the use of existing data bases. Elections Canada and Elections BC would provide update files to each other, and the municipal governments would provide either electronic or hardcopy updates to Elections BC for inclusion in their list. This is the lowest cost alternative, and can be implemented in a phased approach as universal voter registration is established.

Intelligent Use of External Data Sources

Elections BC currently receives electronic files from the Vital Statistics Agency, ICBC and from the Multiple Address Change Web site. Work is in progress to merge these routine update files to produce a single electronic file to automatically update the voters list. This will eliminate duplication of effort and use resources more effectively. By expanding external data sources to include regular updates (assuming a change in legislation) from Elections Canada, the CCRA and municipal governments, it is essential that such streamlining occur to manage the workload efficiently.

Investment in Alternative Service Delivery Models

Development of on-line Web-based confirmation and voter registration capability will provide greater public access and improved service while minimizing demands on Elections BC staff. By timing implementation with Elections Canada, a more integrated approach to voter registration is possible. Additionally, the closure of regional offices of Elections BC due to budget reductions requires development of a new approach to service delivery during electoral events. The roles of District Registrars of Voters and District Electoral Officers are currently under review to address this issue.

Voter Education

Development of a Grade 11 school kit is currently underway, and Elections BC will be closely monitoring the best practices in other jurisdictions regarding youth education programs on electoral democracy. In future elections, Elections BC intends to mail "Where to Vote" information cards to residential addresses where there are currently no registered voters in an effort to encourage participation and improve completeness and currency of the voters list. There is also clearly a role for political parties, interest groups and candidates in encouraging engagement by the public in the electoral process.

Single Data Base for Government Services

It may be timely to consider the concept of a single data base for government clients, which could be accessed by government agencies as required. The data base would contain so-called "tombstone" data of individuals who deal with government as clients of such programs as the Medical Services Plan, Elections BC, Vital Statistics, ICBC, etc. The data held in the central data base would be the name, birthdate, residential and mailing address of the individual, with each separate agency responsible for maintaining any additional data regarding their client unique to their program.

Such a data base would eliminate the costly duplication of maintaining separate data bases of virtually identical data across government, and would provide the public with a single point of contact for address updates. Additionally, a single client data base could be utilized in providing "electronic service delivery" of government programs, tailored to individual requirements. Public policy issues such as privacy and security of personal information would need to be addressed and resolved through informed debate amongst stakeholders.

Single Geographic and Address Data Base for Government

A reliable source of geographic and address data is critical for effective electoral administration. Numerous agencies in government maintain base maps, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data and address data bases to support their programs. The amalgamation of several similar functions in government into the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management will mitigate some duplication, but there is no single data base of commercial, institutional and residential addresses maintained by the government. There is also inconsistency in the GIS data and base map information used within government. A single base of geographic and address information for use by government agencies would reduce duplication and associated costs. Opportunities for public/private partnerships could also be explored.

Enumeration 2004 – A Framework

Considerations

Elections BC is required by the *Election Act* to conduct an enumeration starting on May 3, 2004. However, there are many factors that must be considered in planning this event.

- A federal general election may be in progress in May 2004. There will be considerable voter confusion if Elections BC conducts an enumeration during, or in close proximity to, a federal general election.
- If the *Election Act* is amended to remove the selection of jurors as a permitted use of the voters list, Elections BC would be able to receive voter information from Elections Canada. Permitting time to evaluate this data could result in targeting enumeration efforts more strategically, potentially decreasing the cost and effort of administering a province-wide enumeration by a significant amount while ensuring a more complete, current and accurate voters list as a result.
- As the majority of household moves occur between May and September, deferring the majority of enumeration work until Fall 2004 would result in improved currency while capitalizing on the momentum of the pending May 2005 general election.

Planning Timeline

Elections BC has established the following timeline for determining the appropriate approach to enumerating in 2004:

February to May 2003:	Elections BC and Elections Canada design and conduct the Currency, Completeness and Accuracy (CCA) Audit of the provincial voters list and National Register of Electors.
May 2003:	Discussion paper provided to Election Advisory Committee.
June 2003:	Analysis of CCA Audit data.
July 2003:	CCA Audit report submitted to Chief Electoral Officers of British Columbia and Canada.
September 2003:	Elections BC consults with the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services to discuss enumeration options and to provide an estimate of the cost to administer a province-wide enumeration.
May 2004:	Commence enumeration as required by the *Election Act*.

Conclusion

The objective of the 2004 enumeration is to improve the quality of the voters list in British Columbia. However, this must be performed as part of a larger strategy to establish an effective, affordable and sustainable voter registration and voters list maintenance process. Traditional enumeration methods are an anachronistic approach to a problem better resolved through partnership, education, innovation and technology. There is evidence that voter registration is closely tied to voter participation in electoral democracy, and a focused approach must be taken to ensure that the goal of improved participation rates is met.

Elections BC is committed to ensuring excellence in the impartial administration of the electoral process. Through research, innovation and a strategic approach to improving the voter registration process, British Columbians can be provided high quality voter registration and voters list maintenance in the years to come.

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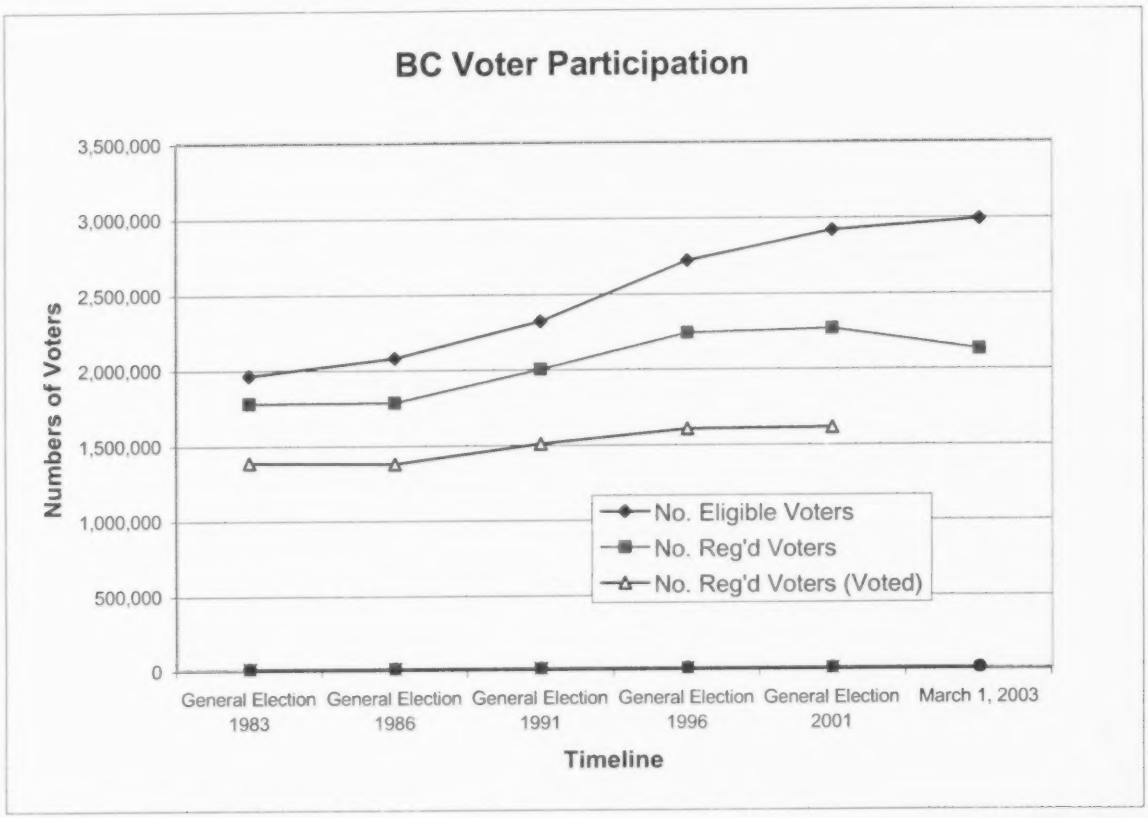

	No. Eligible Voters	No. Reg'd Voters	No. Reg'd Voters (Voted)	% Reg'd Voters (Voted)	% Eligible Voters (Voted)	% Eligible Voters Reg'd
General Election 1983	1,952,689	1,768,063	1,370,878	77.54	70.20	90.55
General Election 1986	2,067,239	1,770,000	1,366,263	77.19	66.09	85.62
General Election 1991	2,306,860	1,989,054	1,493,183	75.07	64.73	86.22
General Election 1996	2,707,808	2,227,424	1,592,655	71.50	58.82	82.26
General Election 2001	2,904,200	2,254,918	1,599,864	70.95	55.09	77.64
March 1, 2003	2,979,500	2,116,795				71.05

General Election 1983	Statement of Votes, p. 5 (line 40-42 erratum noted)
General Election 1986	Statement of Votes, p. 29, line 40-42)
General Election 1991	Statement of Votes, p. 3
General Election 1996	Statement of Votes, pp 2-3
General Election 2001	Statement of Votes, p. 3
March 1,2003	BC Stats, April 21/03 e-mail, and CCA Audit data

ELECTIONS BC

Voter Participation in Canadian Jurisdictions

Provincial and Territorial Election Participation	# of Eligible Voters	# of Reg'd Voters	# of Reg'd Voters (Voted)	% of Reg'd Voters (Voted)	% of Eligible Voters (Voted)	% of Eligible Voters Reg'd
Alberta (2001)	2,301,556	1,922,721	1,015,844	52.80	44.14	83.54
British Columbia (2001)	2,904,200	2,254,918	1,599,864	70.95	55.09	77.64
Manitoba (1999)	852,087	729,349	496,684	68.10	58.29	85.60
New Brunswick (1999)	585,146	525,465	397,179	75.60	67.88	89.80
Nfld & Lab (1999)	418,766	384,709	267,629	69.60	63.91	91.87
Nova Scotia (1999)	726,970	638,655	435,065	68.10	59.85	87.85
Nunavut (1999)	15,228	12,219	10,825	88.60	71.09	80.24
NWT (1999)	27,841	19,694	13,885	70.50	49.87	70.74
Ontario (1999)	8,796,148	7,598,407	4,430,611	58.30	50.37	86.38
PEI (2000)	104,547	94,087	79,844	84.90	76.37	89.99
Quebec (1998)	5,679,702	5,254,482	4,115,163	78.30	72.45	92.51
Saskatchewan (1999)	753,220	622,500	432,240	69.40	57.39	82.65
Yukon (2000)	22,585	18,285	14,368	78.60	63.62	80.96
Federal Election Participation:						
BC (2000)	3,152,611	2,574,322	1,621,101	63.00	51.30	81.40
Canada (2000)	23,827,058	21,243,473	12,997,185	61.2	54.55	89.16

Reference: # of Eligible Voters from Voting Age Population, Statistics Canada Cansim11 report - 51-10

Apr-03